

By Brett Bodemer

SOCIETY WOULD laugh at it. At us. But that doesn't stop us because we count ourselves among those who know only people and not society. Sure, we've heard about society, maybe even seen society; but since we can't talk to him (or her) we concern ourselves with people only.

Our choir is not just any choir. Its most unique feature is the fact that none of us can sing. Oh, we can screech and warble and hoot, but for most people such noises do not songs make. A second feature peculiar to our choir is that we have no rehearsals, only performances. In this way the energy that might be wasted on hours of tiresome practice is released all at once at the audience.

The group has a remarkable founder, and his leadership is essential to our future efforts. The one time our vocals faltered, he was the one to shake us out of our daze and rally us to greater noise, defiance and intensity. His name is Peter; at least that's the name printed on his cards. Though no one has yet verified this, we suspect he is a local painter of some repute. If anyone is the key member of the choir it is Peter, our leader and organizer.

Perhaps I should take time to tell about the advent of our group. The event took place in the heart of downtown, on the first Monday of September, a day when the afternoon sun was warm but not searing. Many people, perhaps after work or after shopping or for mere tourism, had woven their way to a park built over and around the freeway.

The result of high hopes and millions of dollars, it is called the Freeway Park, and like our group, it is unique. Concrete has been cast over the freeway and water brought in and channeled down huge concrete drop-offs. Planters and grass smother much of the cement. The huge rivers of water crash down the chasms only to be pumped up in order to thunder down again. The concrete keeps the freeway from sight, the foliage keeps the concrete from sight, and the water hides the noise of the traffic. It's a city project, this Freeway Park, whose success is real, because people actually come to relax and enjoy themselves in the little oasis.

It is possible to climb onto a concrete block at the top of all the waterfalls and look down at park, people and water. I first took note of Peter as he stood atop this block. Peering down, he must have seen a small but densely foliated patch of land, dotted with people; men lying and sitting on the grass, women reading on the ends of benches, and an old man sputtering in conversation with a rose.

You would expect a future leader to summon the attention of his future followers by shouting from the highest point. Peter did not do this. I had begun climbing the steps beside the gorges of water, and Peter had begun down these same stairs, and we met at a landing. His bearing showed that he was going to make an approach, so I stiffened my walk and prepared to give a mild rebuff. He came up to me, smiled, said nothing, and handed me a small card. "Bible-thumper" was the thought that first crossed my mind, and I expected the card to tell me that Jesus loved me. But it wasn't a religious leaflet; it was a little invitation, and said in tidy black print:

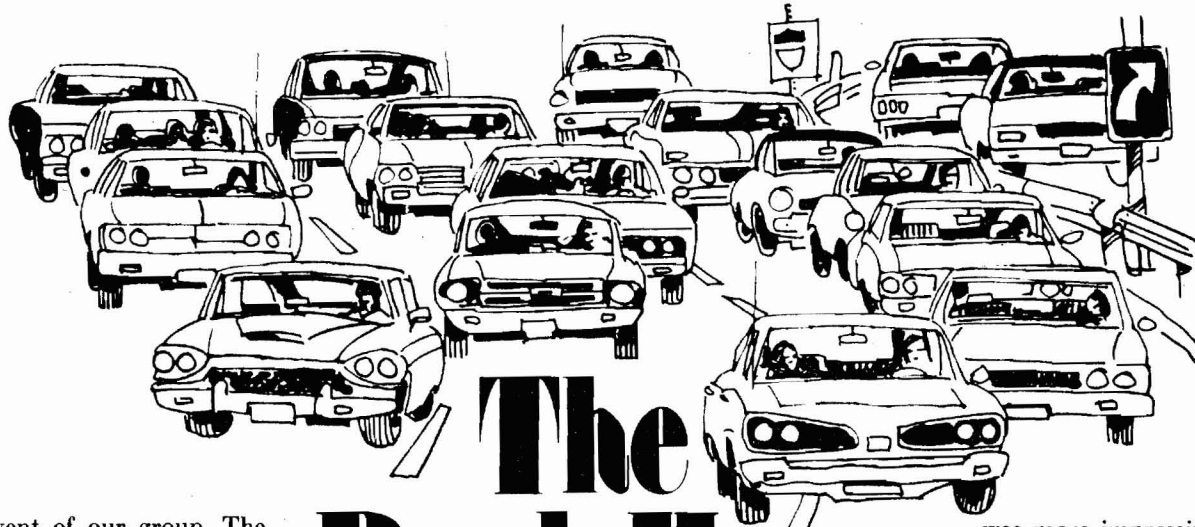
If you wish to see something real AND interesting, stand on the Madison St. overpass in 5 minutes. All invited.

Thank You, Peter.

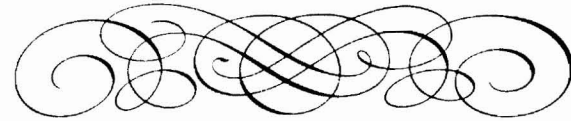
There are times when the "why-why-not?" battle rages just terribly in my head. This was not one of them. I was out for some sun before heading home, and the sun was just as warm on the Madison overpass as at the park, and the chance existed that something of interest might occur.

By the time I arrived at the overpass, 30 to 50 other people had already gathered. They all stood, somewhat embarrassed, waiting for something to happen. It was obvious they didn't know exactly what to expect, and many hands fidgeted with printed cards like mine.

And then Peter — our future choir leader —



The Rush Hour Choir



came up to us. He squeezed in between our loose assembly and the railing over the freeway. We stepped back. Somewhere in my heart — and I don't think I was alone in this — I suddenly felt that I'd been duped into witnessing a stranger's suicide. But when he turned to the railing, he made no move to jump. Instead, looking out over the cars, up at the skyscrapers, out at the huge apartment-crested hill in the distance, the man began to sing. Or at least we saw his jaws move, and his diaphragm rose and fell. Yet we were lucky if we caught a syllable of what he sang, because the freeway noise, absolutely deafening, drowned him out. It was rush hour, and the roar, crash and power of all those cars was terrific.

When Peter finished, he turned to us and pulled a bundle of sheets from under his corduroy jacket. He passed out these lyric sheets and, stepping behind us, sent us forward to sing. He sang, giving us what little of the melody we could pick up. We started softly, but grew louder and louder when we realized that no one could really hear us no matter how well or badly we sang. Soon we shouted with all our hearts at the top of our lungs, we sang for ourselves, for the buildings and cars, for the sun and the warm afternoon that fell on our shoulders. After three songs, Peter collected the sheets and handed us each another card.

The Rush Hour Choir.

Performing the 1st Monday of every month, rain or snow. All invited.

Thank You, Peter.

In spite of all the strangeness, more people showed up on the first Monday of October than on the first Monday in September. Peter might have done some more recruiting. But it seemed more likely, as in my own case, that the members of the September choir brought friends.

The sun graced the October performance, although its rays were lower and cooler than in September. After singing the first melody, Peter took his place behind us, giving us our own will with each song. The concert lasted half an hour. My friend couldn't believe what was happening, though he saw and sang himself. His astonishment lingered even as we had drinks afterward with other members of the choir.

Darkness, clouds and rain hung over us on the November concert, but that didn't prevent our ranks from further swelling. The overpass sidewalk was hidden under a carpet of bodies and sheltered by a ceiling of overlapping umbrellas. Peter started the first song, and again stepped back. The group managed the rest. We sang our hearts out before going home, and it was a thoroughly wonderful musical showing.

The December concert — nearly three weeks ago — was more impressive than the earlier concerts. Unlike the others, its success was for a moment in question. Though it rained again, the group had grown yet larger. The four hundred singers stretched the full length of the overpass and filled the width of the sidewalk. Peter led off, then stepped back. But sometime during the third song a thunderous clonking and a howling of brakes interrupted us; a truck had jackknifed, and just below us cars wound up on each other in the tangles of a chain collision. Our stomachs hollowed. Our voices faltered in the rain. Peter, flushed, rushed to the fore. As the sirens climbed out of silence in the distance, Peter took off his shoes, stood barefoot on the railing, and began to sing, waving his arms like a conductor, urging us back to our vocal fortitude.

It was hard to tell what would happen. We could have remained songless, staring stupefied at the mess of metal and flesh below, or we could all walk off, horrified and mumbling to ourselves. Or we could start singing again. And strangely, we did just that. Loudly, strongly, badly we sang, even though the halted traffic couldn't drown our voices. And soon we were singing for the troubled souls on the eight lanes below, and we sang for the skyscrapers, both those completed and uncompleted, and we sang for the falling rain and the moist gray clouds. And we sang until the wheels started rolling again. But before we left, when Peter collected the lyric sheets, he handed us each a new card.

The Rush Hour Choir sings Christmas carols. December 24th. 8:00 p.m. All invited.

Thank You, Peter.

It's only the 21st of December now, but I can hardly wait for Christmas Eve and the Rush Hour Choir's caroling. Maybe it will snow. Maybe even a thousand people will show up this time, spilling out into the street.

Copyright 1980 Brett Bodemer: Mr. Bodemer, a native of Seattle, has attended The Evergreen State College and the University of Washington. This is his first published fiction.